

Cross-border collaboration in higher education: Learning to work together

David W. Chapman
Amy Pekol
University of Minnesota

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Overview

Organizations, like individuals, must learn to work together. The growing interest in cross-border partnerships in higher education represents an important area in which effectively working together depends on partners understanding each other's motives, needs, and operating constraints. International collaborations among universities have taken many forms, including student and faculty exchanges, dual and joint degree programs, twinning between pairs of universities, and the formation of university networks. While such collaboration is a popular idea among education development specialists, the level of enthusiasm and the nature of the concerns of those university personnel on whom the operation of these collaborative programs actually falls, are less well understood.

This paper reviews recent research and international experience regarding the effectiveness of cross border collaboration in strengthening higher education, across Asia and more broadly in an effort to identify issues that will need to be addressed if such collaborations are to be successful.

Background

As a recent ADB (2012) study has observed, there has been sharp increase over the last five years in international interest in increasing access and strengthening the quality of higher education as a means of supporting national economic development. For example, In 2010 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) identified the strengthening of higher and tertiary education as one of three priority areas for funding (USAID 2011a). The Asian Development Bank has shifted an increased share of its education funding to target the development of higher education (ADB 2011, 2012). The British Department of International Development has recently assigned higher priority to teacher training within its funding plans (Lewis 2009). The common element is their belief that higher education plays an increasingly important role in shaping the capacity of the workforce and fostering the research and innovative thinking in ways that will largely define the economic competitiveness of nations (ADB 2012).

The international interest and resources being channeled to higher education have led to considerable interest among higher education leaders in finding ways to effectively utilize those resources to raise instructional quality and operational efficiency. One widely advocated strategy for accomplishing these ends is greater cross-border collaboration among higher

education institutions (Sakamoto and Chapman 2010a; Chapman, Cummings and Postiglione 2010; Kot 2011, Wilson 2012). Such collaboration has taken many forms, including student and faculty exchanges, dual and joint degree programs, twinning between pairs of universities, and the formation of university networks (Chapman and Sakamoto 2010b). While modalities of collaboration may differ, the idea has caught on. Kuroda (XXXX) reports over 1000 cross-border collaborations are underway across Asia. In 2012 USAID launched a US\$100 million funding competition to promote cross border collaboration among higher education institutions (USAID 2012).

While the prospect of cross border collaboration as a strategy for strengthening the quality and productivity of higher education institutions is a popular idea among education development specialists, the dynamics of these collaborations are not fully understood. Recent research has, however, identified some of the individual and institutional factors that need to be addressed in the design of such programs. This paper summarizes data from three sources:

1. Three recent studies of university networks focused on working through universities to improve national response to emerging infectious diseases in Asia and East Africa.
2. A recent study of the participation of instructional staff in cross border collaborations at a major university in East Africa.
3. Recent research sponsored by the Asian Development Bank on the concerns of university and government officials regarding the benefits and risks of cross border collaboration in higher education.

The view from university and government administrators across Southeast Asia

As summarized in the recent ADB (2012) study, colleges and universities in one country generally enter into partnerships with those in other countries to increase revenue, enhance instructional quality, expand curricular offerings, raise institutional prestige, obtain skill sets not available on their own campus, or some combination of these. The opportunities for these collaborations are made increasingly easier by the growing economic and social integration among countries and the widespread availability of inexpensive, high speed communications, forces that are prominent components of globalization (Chapman and Sakamoto 2010). Nonetheless, the history of cross border collaboration is mixed (Sakamoto and Chapman 2010); not all collaborations yield the payoffs that advocates had anticipated. One risk is that such collaboration gets oversold.

To examine this proposition, ADB sponsored a mixed methods study of 15 senior leaders of higher education institutions, regional networks, and senior researchers in cross-border collaboration from the South and Southeast Asia. Participants completed a ten-item survey regarding their experience with cross border collaborations and attended a two day modified focus group discussion designed to further clarify their views regarding the benefits and risks associated with cross border collaboration. The key findings were

The greatest benefits were also the greatest risks: Cross border collaboration was viewed as contributing to financial stability, quality improvement, mutual understanding, expanded access, student mobility, and brain circulation. At the same time, participants saw risks posed by the possible low quality of programs, brain drain, and foreign competition with local institutions.

Ironically, then, *some of the benefits are also some of the risks*. Foreign involvement could help improve or hurt local institutions; both outcomes could occur. Respondents were divided in their views.

Do cross border partnerships actually help universities? Respondents were ambivalent, though the weight of their sentiment was that collaborations were mostly beneficial. Still, quality control and unwelcome foreign competition were viewed as problems. Many participants were concerned about the risk of exploitative practices, such as the delivery of low quality instruction, primarily by foreign institutions whose only interest was in maximizing profit. While top tier universities are sophisticated and can take care of themselves, regional and private universities may have less capacity to understand and assess potential partners (ADB 2012).

Some collaboration models are more attractive than others. Most cross border collaboration has been (and continues to be) around *instructional programs*. A wide variety of partnership models are used, including dual degrees, twinning, joint degrees, branch campuses, and student exchange. Each model has advocates; there was little or *no convergence* as to any model being particularly effective. The general view was that the promise offered by any particular model will depend on the attractiveness of the program, readiness of institution involved, and government policy (ADB 2012).

The problems countries experience with foreign providers stem from several sources. In some cases, they can be attributed to policy inertia and absence of quality assurance systems. Another reason can be the rather disparate socio-economic levels of the various countries, e.g., Singapore and Myanmar. This point is elaborated in the full paper.

Is collaboration worth the cost?: While much of the attention has focused on finding effective models for partnership, there is also a question of whether cross-border collaborations underway across the region actually foster the development of the colleges and universities that enter into these relationships. Some question the extent that the benefits of these collaborations outweigh the costs. Some of the benefits from academic collaborations are not always tangible. Education leaders find it difficult to calculate financial costs of collaboration. Benefits can be in forms impossible to translate into monetary terms. Still, if parties are satisfied and results fit institutional goals, costs can be justified and considered as worthwhile. Only in cases when collaboration is imposed from outside and there are conflicting vested interests would losses exceed benefits (ADB 2012)

Non-monetary benefits: Some participants see cross-border collaboration as a mechanism through which good teaching, learning, and quality assurance practices from the international partners can be introduced to emerging institutions in the receiving country. Some offered a counter-view, arguing that that good universities in the region look for partners who are equal, if not better. Seldom do universities high in the global ranking offer their expertise to universities low in the global ranking. There is a tendency for collaborations to be initiated by several well known universities, with peripheralisation of the lesser known universities.

Overall, the prevalent view was that benefits outweigh cost. While there have been some serious quality problems, participants suggested that benefits from cross border collaborations are most

likely to outweigh the costs when (a) higher education institutions are strategic in their choice of partners and the activities that they want to undertake, (b) cross border provision complements or supplements and does not crowd out domestic provision, and (c) appropriate safeguards and measures are effected to address/minimize the risks.

Skepticism about motives: Some participants believe that many cross border collaborative programs tend to be profit oriented and over-priced, with the most lucrative segment of the education market is their primary purpose. Closely related to this view is the concern that a main agenda of universities in the region is to build their reputation and prestige. Establishing joint programs with other prestigious universities is seen as a way to increase their own standing.

Quality assurance: These education leaders from across Southeast and East Asia observed that many domestic current quality assurance frameworks are weak and that this has, in some cases, translated into lower expectations for quality. Hence, the response to quality assurance issues involving cross border collaboration has been, for the most part, reactive. To some extent, the weak quality assurance efforts were attributed to the speed at which private for-profit higher education institutions have proliferated; quality assurance organizations have not been able to keep up with the workload (ADB 2012).

University networks as a mechanism of collaboration

While most cross border collaboration is undertaken through some form of university-to-university partnership, there is growing interest in multi-institutional forms of collaboration. Three regionally focused multi-national university networks (one in East Africa, one Southeast Asia) and one national university network (Vietnam) provide a useful illustration of the opportunities and challenges of multi-institutional cross-border collaboration (Chapman et al., 2011a, 2011b, Wilson et al 2010). All three networks are sponsored by USAID and are focused on improving national response to the outbreak of epidemics. All three networks seek to improve communication between University students who plan careers in animal and human health as a way of improving eventual communication among animal and help workers (after the students graduate intake professional positions). Lessons from these networks are summarized below:

1. Different ways of collaborating yield different benefits and challenges. University-to-university partnering and university networks operate with different dynamics. Partnering involves two institutions entering into a relationship aimed at accomplishing a particular activity (e.g, redesign the nursing curriculum, conduct of a research study). The partnering relationship tends to end when the particular task is accomplished. Networks, on the other hand, tend to be focused on a broader set of activities and generally the intention in creating a network is to establish a longer-term, more sustainable set of relationships.
2. The greatest benefit of a network can sometimes be its greatest risk. A benefit of a network is that it can draw on and mobilize a wider range of talent (than a partnering arrangement. It is a framework that can be adapted to address a large number of issues. For that reason, networks can be more attractive to donors because networks appear to accommodate many sub-projects and can be more sustainable than one-to-one partnering. At the same time, a

risk is that building and maintaining relationships within a network gets so complicated that it competes with actually engaging in substantive work.

3. One possible consequence of the increased complexity is that network members do not know what's going on across the network. They feel left out. Networks work best when there is transparency in decision-making. Nonetheless, this can pose a challenge for universities that tend to operate as 'steep hierarchies', characterized by strong, top-down administrative structures. There is a trade-off. If there is too little communication, people feel left out. If there is too much communication, it creates bureaucracy and wastes time.
4. Partnerships and networks should be viewed as a tool, not an end-in-itself. Universities need to be clear about their goals and reasons for joining a network. University administrators and network (or partnership) leaders need to be clear about what constitutes success and how they will know success when they see it.
5. Partners can have different motives for participating and value possible outcomes differently. Partners do not necessarily have to share the same goals, as long as everyone's goals are achieved. However, networks can get in trouble when partners' do not fully understand the expectation and motives of the other partners. Misunderstandings erode network support.
6. While the collaboration through a university network can be used to address many issues, choosing the issue of common interest can require hard decisions and consume a lot of time. Not taking that time has consequences, the most serious of which is loss of network focus. Networks can be like an octopus with arms flying in all directions
7. Network success depends on having an overall network champion and having champions at each member university. However, champions can hijack a network. This happens when a champion channels activities to a narrow set of personal interests or uses a network to enhance the standing of particular individuals
8. University networks may span different national legal systems and different university operating procedures. When that is the case, network members must recognize that member universities may operate with different rules and procedures. Partners need to know how decisions are made at each member university and the national rules and regulations that different universities must abide by.
9. Some university networks are funded by external agencies, e.g., 'third party funders' (e.g., SEAMEO, USAID, World Bank). While this can contribute needed resources and make new initiatives possible, the role of external funder in determining network activities and schedule needs to be clear. The availability of third party funding can drive universities to join activities they are really interested in, leading to halfhearted participation. Another risk is that too large or too fast a money flow from third party funders can distort the flow of activities.
10. Weaker institutions and lower prestige disciplines have the most to gain by partnering or networking with stronger institutions and/or higher prestige disciplines. Conversely, strong partner may see such collaboration as "helping the competition". Some faculty in at least one

network expressed a concern that strong universities might be losing their comparative advantage by collaborating. Hence, collaboration is most attractive when it is among equals.

Incentives for faculty participation in partnership and network activities

While Asia arguably leads the world in university partnership activity, experience gained in other regions offers useful insights into the operation of partnership and network arrangements. Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East are also aggressively experimenting with partnership models. To that end, recent research by Wilson (2012) examined the within-university dynamics of faculty participation in cross border collaborations that may offer useful insights to those launching partnership in other parts of the world.

She posited that, if universities regard cross border collaboration as an effective way to strengthening their institution, it would be evidenced by those institutions initiating these arrangements and seek out international partners. In her study of Makerere University in Uganda, she found that cross border collaboration was indeed popular; Makerere had engaged in nearly 100 international partnership relationships over the preceding 10 years. However, of the subsample of 37 partnerships that faculty at Makerere identified as the most successful, none had been initiated by Makerere itself. All were initiated by external partners. Moreover, faculty participating in partnership activities were not necessarily motivated by a commitment to institution building. Rather, in the 37 partnerships she studied, faculty were attracted to the personal financial benefits (e.g., consultancies, stipends) offered by international partners for their participation and, sometimes, to the publications that might result from the collaboration. In short, faculty participation in cross border partnerships was undertaken by faculty members largely as individual entrepreneurship.

Wilson (2012) found little evidence that these partnership actually led to institution-wide strengthening of programs or curricula, in part because the university was not organized in a way that built the benefits of these partnerships into the longer term fabric of the institution. In the Makerere case, challenges included overly bureaucratic procurement process, selection of partnership participants based on criteria other than merit, and inter-departmental rivalries over 'ownership' of the partnership.

The wider message to be taken from Wilson's study is that the success of cross border collaboration, whether through a partnership or a network, ultimately depends on the interest and commitment of individual instructional staff and administrators. Their motives need to be understood if cross border collaboration in higher education is to be designed and managed successfully.

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